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ABSTRACT

The paper describes how creative dramatics activities can be structured to promote appropriate leisure and recreational behaviors in autistic adolescents. The foundation of such an approach is the spontaneous, guided, and improvisational play processes of children. In addition to leisure and recreational skill development, creative dramatics are suggested to promote social skills, play skills, and increased awareness of self and others. Guidelines for adapting creative dramatics for adolescents with autism include assessment of the task for component parts, interest level, and prerequisite skills. After adaptation is accomplished, participants' strengths and weaknesses should be analyzed in the determination of structure, mode of presentation, and grouping. A case study illustrates the adaptation of two activities (pantomime and sound effects tasks) for autistic adolescents. (CL)

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Creative Drama for Autistic Adolescents: Expanding Leisure and Recreational Options

The range of services needed by autistic and autistic-like adolescents extends to the provision of appropriate recreation and leisure opportunities. To achieve this end, opportunities must be structured to accomodate the developmental deficit in imaginative play behaviors which tends to characterize this population (Knoblock, 1983; Koegel, Rincover, and Egel, 1982; Kugelmass, 1970; Michelman, 1974; Oppenheim, 1974; Roberts, 1977; Wing, 1972). The autistic adolescent's inability to organize leisure activities, to creatively and constructively use free time, and to participate in social experiences, can be viewed, in part, as symptomatic of having not learned how to play (Elgar, 1977; Uline, 1982; Wehman and Schleien, 1980). Programs and activities which incorporate training in how to play, however, can expand and enrich for autistic adolescents the repertoire of appropriate leisure and recreational options.

One viable program alternative for autistic adolescents, creative drama, incorporates play training with recreational and educational group activities. With certain modifications, standard creative drama activities can be used to promote appropriate leisure and recreational behaviors in autistic adolescents. The goal of this paper is to describe how creative drama activities can be structured developmentally to meet the specific needs of this population.

Principles of Creative Drama

Creative drama, the informal branch of children's drama, is defined as those forms of improvised drama played with spontaneous dialogue and action

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(Duke, 1973). The recreational and educational applications of creative drama have involved all age groups and have used structured activities* to provide participants with immediate and dynamic experiences interacting with others, rather than produce theatrical presentations for an audience (Faulkes, 1975).

The underlying process of creative drama is the spontaneous dramatic play of young children, the guided dramatic play of older children, and the improvisational games, characterizations, and dramatizations which arise from interacting with the environment (McIntyre, 1974). With these natural processes serving as a foundation, creative drama exercises and activities can be sequenced so as to mirror the natural developmental stages of childhood play (Warger, 1983).

Creative drama begins with basic warm-up or sense awareness activities, which are used to stimulate participant exploration and response to multi-sensory stimuli, and which can be seen as analogous to the sensorimotor manipulation stage of infants. Following warm-ups, creative drama participants are encouraged to copy movements and sounds within the environment, behaviors which are similar to those executed during the imitation play stage. As ability to imitate increases, pantomime activities, the content of which parallels symbolic play behaviors, are attempted. Pantomime participants first pretend to use objects, and then become those objects (or persons or animals). Once pantomiming skills are proficient, characterization and dialogue opportunities are expanded, with story ideas presented for play-acting or improvisation. At this point, activities begin to resemble the content of sociodramatic play.

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*It is assumed that the reader has a basic knowledge of creative drama activities and exercises. The following authors provide excellent background information: Barnfield, 1968; Behr, Snyder, & Clopton, 1979; Cottrell, 1979; McCaslin, 1974; McIntyre, 1974; Siolin, 1963; Ward, 1957.

The use of creative drama activities can be seen as serving a dual purpose. Besides providing a unique recreational and leisure option, it also provides a medium for fostering those skills resulting from natural childhood play which may have been arrested or underdeveloped in autistic children. Participants can become more aware and capable of using their senses, voices, bodies, emotions, imaginations, and intellect, in addition to developing social skills (Behr, Snyder, and Clopton, 1979; Hensel, 1977; Jennings, 1978; Shattner, 1967; Shaw and Stevens, 1979).

Guidelines for Accessibility with Autistic Adolescents

Severely handicapped children and youth do not explore, investigate, and experiment in the same manner as their nonhandicapped peers (Vaughan, 1979). In order for many sensory stimulation and symbolic play experiences to be accessible to autistic adolescents, adults often are needed to initiate and structure activities (Knoblock, 1983; Michelman, 1974; Moran, 1979; Roberts, 1977). Thus, creative drama activities must be structured appropriately to meet the specific needs of this population. Both the task content and the adolescents' particular strengths and weaknesses as they relate to the chosen activities must be analyzed prior to planning instruction.

Analyze activity content. The creative drama task first must be analyzed for conceptual content or level of play behaviors. The particular level of play, sensorimotor, imitation, symbolic, or sociodramatic, represented in the activity is determined at this point. This determination aids instructors when selecting appropriate activities to meet goals and objectives.

A standard creative drama activity, pretending to jump an imaginary rope in a group, will be used as an example to demonstrate how a conceptual analysis is completed. The basic activity, which requires sociodramatic play behaviors

(participants collectively engage in a pretend activity where movements represent the rope),may be reduced to the following component activities:

-Using an actual rope, hold and turn it, see it being turned, hear it touch the ground, etc. (sensorimotor/imitation)

-Imitate the instructor jumping an actual rope (imitation)

-Imitate the instructor holding and turning a pretend rope. At first, objects with varying degrees of similarity may be substituted for a rope (imitation/symbolic)

-Imitate the instructor jumping a pretend rope (imitation/symbolic)

-Jump a pretend rope (symbolic)

-With a partner, turn a rope (sensorimotor)

-Jump a rope being turned by two people (sensorimotor)

-With a partner, turn a pretend rope (symbolic)

-Watch two people turn a pretend rope and stamp each time the pretend rope hits the ground (symbolic)

-Jump a pretend rope that two people are turning (symbolic/sociodramatic)

While this list of component parts is only a sampling of the many possibilities, it does illustrate how a basic activity may be conceptually analyzed. Given this conceptual information, instructors have a basis for modifying basic activities to accomodate a particular group.

Activity content also must be analyzed for interest level. Care must be taken to ensure that participants have an adequate experiential base with which to understand the content. In addition, the motivational aspects of content must be scrutinized. For example, content should allow participants opportunities to perform movements and implement skills which are enjoyable. Further, it must be determined whether or not the content will appeal to the age and sex type of

the group.

Finally, the format of the activity must be analyzed for prerequisite skills. If the activity involves manipulation of materials, then the particular perceptual-motor skill level necessary should be assessed. The input and output modes, whether they be visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or olfactory, required of the participants to complete the task must be specified. Learning and adaptive behaviors, such as attending to task, attention span, initiating behaviors, independence, etc., also must be considered. Additionally, the social interaction requirements (e.g., small or large group; one-on-one) must be stated.

Respond to Adolescents' Needs. The key to making activities accessible to autistic adolescents lies in the appropriate determination of structure. Once the activity is analyzed, participants' relative strengths and weaknesses must be scrutinized for instructional implications. For each element of activity analysis, it must be determined whether or not participants possess the abilities required for successful performance. This preliminary procedure of matching student abilities with task content and format is essential for planning appropriate instruction.

Of critical concern is the level at which participants are able to produce play behaviors. Although some higher functioning autistic adolescents will know the meaning of the pretend command, they still may need more experience and guidance if they are to be proficient complying with it. For this group, a large selection of activities representing sensorimotor and imitation stages in conjunction with those at the symbolic stage, will be helpful. For those autistic adolescents who have difficulty imitating behaviors and sounds, a large number of activities, in addition to several activities which incorporate adult instruction with imitation, will be appropriate. Overall, instructors need to choose more

activities which participants can easily master, to counter balance those which require more effort.

Autistic adolescents manifest a variety of adaptive behaviors and evidence a wide range of abilities which also will affect the selection and implementation of creative drama activities. Instructors can utilize participants' strengths and abilities by designing and choosing those activities which provide constructive outlets for particular behaviors. For example, if an adolescent group enjoys music and rhythms, experiences incorporating this medium can be chosen (e.g., imitate rhythms; make rhythms with objects; move specified parts of the body to music). Or, if a group enjoys olfactory input, then smelling or tasting components can be integrated constructively into activities (e.g., a camp scene where pine air freshner can be smelled and freeze dried foods can be tasted).

Instructors also should accomodate individual needs when designing activity format and presentation sequences. Generally, autistic groups benefit from short and similarly sequenced sessions, where activities are varied according to group attention span. For example, even though a number of tasks are to be presented, the same introductory and closing activities should be used for each session. Further, routine can be built into sessions by repeating several activities that participants have mastered. The seating structure and transition time additionally can be structured similarly each time in response to the need for sameness (e.g., chimes are sounded, the instructor states that it's time for creative drama, participants move their chairs into a circle).

Attention also must be given to grouping. For beginning groups, a ratio of one adult to one or two adolescents often is needed. Adults serve a dual purpose: one as instructor; the other as a model for play behaviors. Moreover, as activities are designed with enjoyment as a goal, it is critical for social

development that pleasure obtained from the experience is linked to the participatio of others. Thus, circle seating arrangements are useful for fostering a sense of groupness, as well as for interaction.

For pleasure to be obtained from the experience, group interests must be integrated into the activities. In fact, the most successful activities generally are built around topics and incidents from participants' lives. For example, chores lend themselves particularly well to pantomiming and story-making. If the group has a particular interest, capitalize on it by designing an activity around it (e.g., if the group enjoys bus rides, set up the chairs like a bus and pretend to take a ride; if cooking is of interest, pretend to cook their favorite foods). To increase involvement in activities, stimulating or novel objects are useful. With the guidance of an adult, these objects can be explored, experimented with, and finally used to stimulate imitative and symbolic behaviors. Unusual hats, strange costumes, and colorful jewelry all tend to lend themselves to dramatic exploration.

Putting it All Together: A Case Study

The following examples describe how creative drama activities can be adapted for a group of adolescents with autism or autistic characteristics. The particular activities all have been used in a community recreation program serving autistic and autistic-like adolescents. To illustrate how activity restructuring fosters accessibility, the standard creative drama activity will be presented with an analysis of its content and suggested modifications for use with autistic populations.

Activity: Object Transformation. Participants are presented with an object and instructed one at a time to transform the object by pantomiming

another use for it. (e.g., a soup ladle becomes an umbrella or a microphone; an automobile part becomes a transitor radio or camera). After each person demonstrates their imagined use, the group guesses what the object has become. The play stage represented in the activity is symbolic. To complete the task, participants will need the following abilities: response to and understanding of verbal commands; response to visual input with physical output; concentration and focus on others' movements; ability to work independently in a large group.

To adapt this activity for adolescents functioning at an imitation stage, the first step involves restructuring the play behavior content. Attention also must be given to modifying the independent group-work format. Thus, the activity can be adapted in the following way. While seated in a circle, participants are instructed to focus on the group leader. The same stimulus object is presented to each participant. The instructor moves the object and the group copies the movements. Next, one-at-a-time, each adolescent produces a movement with the object, which the group copies. It should be noted that some adolescents may benefit from actual manipulation of the object prior to producing a movement on command. As participants become proficient at copying, the question, "What else could this object be used for?", may be posed. At this point, adults may be needed to suggest ideas and guide responses.

Activity: Mirror. In Mirror, pairs imitate people looking into mirrors. To achieve this end, one partner pretends to be a mirror image of the other. The play stage represented in this activity is symbolic, with some sociodramatic elements. To complete the task, the following abilities are needed: response to and understanding of commands; response to visual input with physical or motor pace; concentration; ability to work in pairs with one leading and the other following.

This activity can be modified for a group working at either a sensorimotor or imitation stage. Holding onto plastic dowels as they sit facing one another, pairs (adolescent and adult) move to music. After moving together at will, the adult announces, "You move, I'll follow". Next, the adolescent is asked to follow the adult's movements. As skill develops, the dowels can be removed and the adolescents instructed to move a part of the body while the adult copies the motions. Roles are then reversed.

Activity: Sound Effects. In groups, participants make up a story and "tell" the story through the use of sounds. For example, a story about a haunted house may sound as follows: footsteps, hesitating, a knock at a door, low moans and faint laughter, a door opens, more moans, a cat screech, chains rattling, footsteps, a loud "Boo!". The play stage represented in this activity is sociodramatic. The following abilities are needed to complete the task: Responding to and understanding of commands; response to auditory input with verbal or physical output; listening; developing a story; understanding the concept of a haunted house; working together in a group; performing on cue.

To adapt this activity, participants first might need to explore sound-making on a sensorimotor level, therefore objects might be presented for participants to make sounds with (e.g., bounce a ball; open an envelope). Alternatively, participants could listen to sounds and identify them. On an imitation level, sounds could be replicated, much the same as movements were in the object transformation activity previously described. A short (five to six sentence) story involving common sounds could be written for participants to respond in sound to. For instance, a story might read as follows,

> You're thirsty and so you walk into the kitchen (footsteps). You pour water into a cup (water is poured). You add a scoop of Kool-aid and stir the water (spoon stirs in cup). You taste the water (drinking sound). It tastes terrible!

Conclusion

Providing appropriate recreational and leisure opportunities to autistic adolescents presents professionals with a unique challenge. Due to the nature of the handicap, play development may have been arrested or slowed in early years, thus limiting the range of leisure experiences available during adolescence. Creative drama offers a viable recreational program option, as well as an instructional means for developing play behaviors. By treating the creative drama activity content as representative of developmental play stages, and by capitalizing on the adaptive behaviors and skills of the participants, activities can be structured and sequenced to ensure success. Further, since the activities require academic and social skills, they can be used to reinforce learning and to provide a unique format for skill practice.

All children and youth, handicapped or not, need the opportunities and experiences offered by the creative arts. With modifications, creative drama can make these valuable opportunities and experiences accessible to autistic adolescents.

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